

THE LANDING

By John Herrick

READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions

1. Which character, Danny or Meghan, experiences more growth over the course of *The Landing*?
2. How does the author use scenes from the past to provide context for the Danny and Meghan's present circumstances?
3. Why do you think free-spirited Meghan wound up in a stagnant lifestyle over time? Did she fear something deep down? Did she feel beaten down by life? What insight can the reader find in the flashback chapters?
4. Why do you think the reserved Danny finds comfort in performing for an audience?
5. By the time the present-day story opens in Chapters 1 and 2, Danny and Meghan have, in effect, traded places: Danny made a sudden, free-spirited move to Sunset Beach, while Meghan confined herself to a comfortable relationship. Is this a coincidence? Or did each character, on a subconscious level, adopt characteristics of the other in an attempt to search for the other?
6. In Chapter 4, the author provides a background on Danny's post-college lifestyle in Ohio. He contrasts the cold Cleveland weather with the warm weather of Sunset Beach. How is each a metaphor for Danny's life stage at the respective location? Or how does each weather condition conflict with Danny's internal condition?
7. Jay McGrady's personality differs from those around him. What purpose does this character serve in *The Landing*?
8. In Chapter 17, when referring to Danny's relocation to Sunset Beach, Meghan's mother says, "I don't think he drove to the beach. I think he ran." What did she mean by this?
9. In Chapter 20, Meghan undergoes an overwhelming emotional response to Danny's new song, "Breathing Yesterday." Have you ever heard a song on the radio that impacted you or arrived at a pivotal moment in your life?

10. In Chapter 21, Danny decides to abandon the prospect of Meghan’s love—and an era in his life. Have you ever walked away from a dream? Do you believe someone can walk away from a deeply ingrained dream, or will it come back to haunt him or her?
11. After reading *The Landing*, reconsider its Prologue and Epilogue. How does the Prologue foreshadow events to come? How is the Epilogue a parallel to the novel’s present-day ending?

Questions and Answers from the Author

What was your motivation in writing *The Landing*?

A love for the Carolina coast and a passion for songwriting inspired *The Landing*. I visited the area often while growing up.

Also, at the time the novel was being written, I found myself in a tug-of-war between my job in information technology and a sense of calling as a writer. I couldn’t escape the desire to pursue my twenty-year dream to write, yet I felt stuck in the status quo. While writing the novel, I discovered my own internal struggle helped fuel the descriptions of Danny’s similar internal struggle.

Unlike many novels, *The Landing* is quick and to the point. Was this intentional?

Yes. We live in a microwave society of instant gratification. I wanted the book to reflect that brisk pace while giving the reader a sense of satisfaction at the end of each chapter. The pacing also provides a contrast to Danny’s lifestyle at the beach, amplifying the notion that he does not fit the societal norm.

Music plays an integral role in this novel. Why did you decide to structure the story around it? Did you consider immersing Danny in a different art form?

On the surface, I chose to make Danny a songwriter because I am familiar with the songwriting process and the challenges a songwriter faces. The aim was to create a realistic character and, because I was limited to writing in the evenings, familiarity reduced the amount of research required and maximized the creative time.

At a deeper level, music is a shared experience. Not a single human being has not been exposed to it and been affected by it. When we can’t find the words to express something, often that expression can be found in the words of another, or even in a simple chord or melody. I never considered another art form for Danny because, unlike a painting or sculpture, music is more easily and immediately accessible — physically and emotionally — to everyone. Music evokes emotion, triggers memories, and sets a mood. In fact, it’s usually playing in the background when I write. Personally, I believe everyone is impacted by the music they are listening to at any given period in their lives, almost like a living journal. I once read that screenwriter Cameron Crowe keeps a song journal of the music he listens to when he writes a screenplay. I relate to that.

Danny sends two songs to Meghan: “Meghan’s Song” and “Breathing Yesterday.” You provided the lyrics for “Breathing Yesterday,” which Danny wrote in the present day, but not “Meghan’s Song,” which he wrote years before. Why the missing lyrics?

“Meghan’s Song” was purposely left to the reader’s imagination. The emotional element needed to be strong for this pivotal scene, and providing concrete lyrics didn’t seem to do my characters justice. Instead, the reader is encouraged to imagine what could be. Moreover, this decision was intended to reflect how we relate to each other: some moments are meant to be shared by two people, and the tenderness of those moments prevents us from sharing them with others. “Meghan’s Song” is one of those moments. In the book, Danny and Meghan’s lives have been opened to for all to read, so that early song is one of the few private things the two characters can still call their own.

As a male writer, how did you get inside the female mind to form a character like Meghan?

You’d be surprised how much you can learn about people by paying deliberate attention to them in social scenarios – on a date, in a meeting, in a social circle. By observing different people, you begin to notice mannerisms and dialogue styles that accompany certain personalities. But knowing my own limits, I do solicit opinions from female friends.

You featured a striking assortment of supporting characters. Would you shed some light on some of them?

The male characters were created to contrast with Danny, while the female characters were created to remind Meghan of who she is not.

Jay McGrady serves as Danny’s foil and provides comic relief to the story; he’s the likeable loudmouth with a heart of gold, whose primary purpose is to make Danny look better by comparison. But even such a person offers unique insight – and in Jay’s case, that insight involved jalapenos! Brian Garrett symbolizes the safety of traditional success, a polar opposite to Danny’s pursuit of a nontraditional dream. Both career routes are depicted in a positive fashion.

Meghan’s mother is in a long, healthy marriage, in contrast to Meghan’s noncommittal relationship. Christine Kelker, as a musician, has the advantage of being able to play “Meghan’s Song.” To understand the song fully, Meghan needed to explore the lyrics in conjunction with the music. Until that point, her hands had been tied.

Do you foresee a sequel to *The Landing*?

No. When I consider the story of Danny and Meghan, I feel the loose ends have been tied, that I’ve communicated what I set out to communicate. Trying to reach beyond the novel would, in my opinion, water down the passion behind the characters’ story. When I think about possible storylines for a sequel, the idea that comes to mind involves Danny getting a record contract. That would be interesting, but it would also add enormous scope to Danny and Meghan’s lives. It seems part of *The Landing*’s tenderness resides in its intimacy. The only other idea that lends itself to a sequel is an indirect one: the exploration of a supporting character like Reece. But that doesn’t pull at me, either.

What motivates you to select one project over another?

In general, three elements tug me toward a writing project, including a novel like *The Landing*:

1. The story emerges internally rather than externally.
2. Commercial and target-audience appeal.
3. A potential to inspire or encourage the reader — my favorite element.

Regarding the third element above, I believe if a writer invests his/her heart, readers will notice and respond to it. Regardless of what is written — a novel, a song, and so on — it can trigger vastly different responses. It can serve as entertainment for one person. It might inspire another to reach for his/her dreams. And that same novel or song could prove an encouragement to a person enduring pain or contemplating suicide. Impact potential is a privilege and helps fuel me.

What experiences do you feel best prepared you as a writer?

My degree is in mass communication, which can be boiled down to one critical concept: target audience. Also, volunteering to write for free provided solid experience — and with it came the freedom to explore. Funny thing, I was rejected for every paid writing position for which I ever applied. Sometimes only you and God see talent in its seed form!

Another valuable experience was in songwriting. In four minutes, you are tasked with presenting a character, a motivation, description, and a monologue to a specific audience and find a way to evoke an emotion in them. You're telling a story in a very short form and must choose your words carefully. But while a book tells the whole story, a song is more like a snapshot in time — "Here is where I'm at, at this moment."